



Principal Collegial Leadership and Teacher Well-being: The Moderating Role of Teaching Experience and School Context (Rural/Urban)

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Abstract

Teacher well-being is a factor that has gained the researchers' attention due to its positive effects on students and schools. This cross-sectional study examines the moderating roles of teaching experience and school context (rural versus urban) in the relationship between collegial leadership and teacher well-being. Data were collected from 553 teachers in the K-12 educational system. The study confirmed the positive role that collegial leadership characterized by supportive relationships, collaboration, a common set of values, and shared decisions has on teacher well-being. In addition, the findings indicated that this relationship is stronger for teachers in the early years of their teaching careers, particularly in rural schools. As teachers gain more teaching experience, they become more efficient and autonomous, and the effect of leadership on well-being decreases. These results contribute to understanding the antecedents of well-being and offer practical recommendations regarding principals' supportive behaviors.

Keywords: Collegial leadership; rural area; teaching experience; teacher well-being

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1. Introduction

The teaching profession has a dual character: it represents a path to self-realization and a source of inspiration for teachers, while it is a process subject to various challenges from students, parents, and society (Robu & Stoica, 2023). Previous studies emphasize that teachers' perception of professional satisfaction and quality of life influences learning, student performance, and retention in the system (OECD, 2017; Pyhältö et al., 2010). At a global level, the phenomenon of professional abandonment has emerged in educational systems, and the lack of well-being is recognized as one of the main causes of the staff crisis (Zhou et al., 2024), which requires reconsidering well-being as a collective responsibility, not just an individual one (Roffey, 2012). In addition, teachers' intentions to leave the teaching profession are based on burnout, stress, high workload, insufficient recognition, and dissatisfaction with the educational environment (Li & Yao, 2022; OECD, 2020). In this context, school principals play a role in cultivating a positive school climate and supporting teacher well-being (Morris et al., 2020). Collegial leadership is distinguished by principal leadership that is based on strengthening supportive relationships, a sense of belonging to the school community, and organizational health (DiPaola & Guy, 2009).

1.1. Collegial leadership

Leadership is “a process of social influence, which maximizes the effort of others, towards the achievement of a goal” (Kruse, 2013, p. 2). Collegial leadership is an approach that values equal rights, mutual respect, and collegial relationships. Thus, collegiality becomes an assumed value and a group culture (Zulkifly et al., 2020). Bush (2010) considers that the power distributed between some or all members of an organization reflects the definition of collegiality. At the same time, this is an integration process through which personal perspectives and visions align with collective ones, built synergistically (Singh & Manser, 2002). According to Bush (2010), the fundamental characteristics of collegial leadership are:

- a) normative dimension: this type of leadership promotes democratic decisions and management based on common agreement;
- b) the authority of expertise: due to the knowledge and professionalism of the teaching staff, collegiality and involvement in complex decision-making processes are beneficial to educational institutions;
- c) small size: collegial leadership is optimal for smaller structures, where each member can be listened to;
- d) shared axiology: the success of the model also depends on the existence of a common set of values and a common vision, which are built in the early stages of the career;
- e) consensus: through collegiality, conflicts are avoided and decisions become the result of argument-based negotiation.

A school's success in achieving its objectives depends on the educational climate and the set of common values. Teachers' commitment to common principles favors the efficient management of available resources and innovation at the institutional level (Murgatroyd & Morgan, 1994). In addition, previous studies highlight that leadership that is based on collegiality, collaboration, and mutual support is a predictor of job satisfaction and well-being (Amirian et al., 2025; Hu et al., 2019; Karaferiye et al., 2025; Orta et al., 2021). A school climate that promotes support, trust, collaborative professional development, and participation in decision-making reduces burnout, stress, and increases the quality of education (Dhola & Sheokand, 2025; Dreer, 2022; Guo et al., 2025).

1.2. Teacher well-being

Well-being is a complex concept that includes two components: eudaimonia and hedonia (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Eudaimonia refers to the full realization of potential with an emphasis on human functioning (Aristotle et al., 2009). Psychological well-being is understood from a eudaimonic

perspective and, according to Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale (1989), comprises six dimensions: purpose in life, mastery of the environment, autonomy, positive relationships, personal growth, and self-acceptance. On the other hand, within hedonia, which involves the pursuit of pleasure (Watson, 1895), subjective well-being stands out. This is operationalized through life satisfaction and the predominance of positive emotions (Diener, 1984).

In an educational context, Acton & Glasgow (2015) provide a definition of teacher well-being, recognizing hedonic, eudemonic influences and the relational nature:

Teacher wellbeing may be defined as an individual sense of personal professional fulfillment, satisfaction, purposefulness, and happiness, constructed in a collaborative process with colleagues and students (p. 102).

According to the OECD (2020), teachers' occupational well-being includes four dimensions: cognitive (self-efficacy, concentration ability); social (relationships with students, colleagues, principal); subjective (life satisfaction, positive/negative affect, life evaluation); physical and mental (stress, fatigue, psychosomatic disorders). When teachers report these dimensions positively, the teaching-learning process and students' academic performance improve significantly (Caprara et al., 2006; Duckworth et al., 2009; Turner & Thielking, 2019).

Over time, researchers have analyzed teacher well-being through its association with various antecedents and consequences, highlighting the role of the following factors: trust in colleagues, emotional intelligence (Yin et al., 2018); support from the leader, workload, school culture (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019); professional status and collective efficacy (Capone & Petrillo, 2020). School management characterized by poor relationships between the principal and teachers, a lack of support and involvement from the principal, predicts poor mental health, job dissatisfaction, and intentions to quit teaching (Travers & Cooper, 1993). Thus, high levels of stress and depression are negatively associated with students' performance (Hoglund et al., 2015; McLean & Connor, 2015).

1.3. The role of teaching experience and school context (rural/urban)

Teachers acknowledge the idea that "experience is the best teacher" (Goodlad, 1984). Illustrated by the number of years of teaching and training in the field, teaching experience is an important source of teacher well-being, but it still needs clarification (Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2017). Depending on the educational context, some authors report positive effects of high experience on effectiveness (e.g., Kini & Podolsky, 2016), while other studies highlight negative or insignificant associations (e.g., Gastaldi et al., 2014; Kourmoussi & Alexopoulos, 2016).

At the same time, teaching experience stands out as a factor that determines self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Li et al., 2019). Teachers' confidence in their abilities to carry out career-specific activities and achieve educational goals (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007) is often associated with teacher well-being (Zee & Koomen, 2016). In addition, perceptions of school leadership vary by stage of the teaching career. The perceptions of novice teachers are more evident; they need more cooperation and communication than teachers with high experience (Bellibas & Liu, 2017; Mikser et al., 2021).

In the school context (rural/urban), differences are identified in the factors that influence well-being. In the urban area, students' behavioral stress, workload, and administrative tasks lead to low well-being, anxiety, and psychological distress (Ejaz et al., 2025; Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023). In rural areas, educational resources are limited and professional development is less accessible, which leads to depressive states (Ejaz et al., 2025). However, in some rural Norwegian schools, teachers benefit from a positive organizational climate, collaboration, and effective leadership, which increases their well-being (Burns & Machin, 2013).

1.4. Research gap

Although previous studies highlight the importance of teachers' well-being, Zhou et al. (2024) mention in their meta-analysis that its antecedents and effects are not fully understood. Therefore,

it is recommended to introduce moderators, mediators, and investigate their degree of influence on the correlations between various variables and well-being (Zhou et al., 2024). At the same time, the specialized literature highlights the role of individual and contextual factors on well-being, as well as the need to deepen studies by exploring in more detail the elements that determine this state (Nazari & Alizadeh Oghyanus, 2021; Viac & Fraser, 2020).

1.5. The present study

Based on the previously mentioned literature, the present study aims to analyze how teachers' experience and school context (rural/urban) serve as moderators of the relationship between collegial leadership and teachers' well-being. Furthermore, current studies have insufficiently investigated these potential moderators and their practical implications in the educational context. Thus, the proposed research questions are:

RQ1: How is collegial leadership related to teachers' well-being?

RQ2: What role does teachers' teaching experience play in this relationship?

RQ3: What role does the school context (rural/urban) play in this relationship?

To answer these research questions, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Collegial leadership is positively associated with teachers' well-being.

H2: Teaching experience is positively associated with teachers' well-being.

H3: Teaching experience moderates the relationship between collegial leadership and teachers' well-being.

H4: School context moderates the relationship between collegial leadership and teachers' well-being.

This empirical research model (Figure 1) is expected to contribute to a more complex understanding of the mechanisms by which these variables support well-being among pre-university teachers.

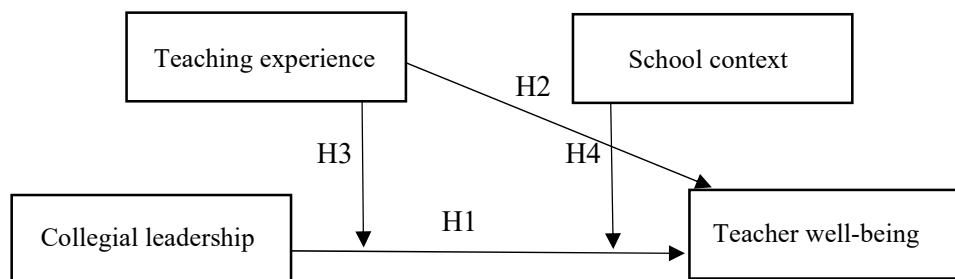


Figure 1. Theoretical hypothesis model

2. Method

This research is a non-experimental, cross-sectional study. The design was selected because it involves building inferences about a study area by collecting data in a single time period (Cohen et al., 2018). Furthermore, the analysis of moderating factors reveals how the independent variable's effect on the dependent variable is moderated (Preacher et al., 2016). In this study, we will analyze whether teaching experience and school context (rural/urban), as moderating variables, affect the effect of collegial leadership (predictor variable) on teachers' well-being (predicted variable).

2.1. Participants and procedure

The participants in this study are 553 teachers from pre-university education: 79% female teachers (438) and 21% male teachers (115), aged between 18 and 67 years ($M = 31.63$, $SD =$

10.093). The participants were distributed according to the geographical location of the school (58% in urban areas; 42% in rural areas); teaching level (31% preschool education; 34% primary education; 23% secondary education; 12% high school education); and type of school unit (86% in state public schools; 14% in private schools).

After providing informed consent, participants completed an online questionnaire. Participants were informed that responses were anonymous, confidential, and that they could withdraw at any time without risk. They were also assured that the study's results would be used solely for research purposes.

2.2. Measures

Collegial leadership

To measure collegial leadership, we used the *Organizational Health Inventory (OHI) - Collegial Leadership* subscale, developed by Hoy et al. (1991). The subscale includes 10 items and focuses on the principal's leadership practices, characterized by openness, support, friendliness, and equality (e.g., "The principal is friendly and approachable."; "The principal goes out of his or her way to show appreciation to teachers."). The response options are on a four-point Likert scale, where 1 means *rarely* and 4 means *very often*. The scale has also been used in previous research where it has proven good psychometric properties (e.g., Kingsford-Smith et al., 2021). The total score was calculated by obtaining the mean score of the 10 items. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.95.

Teacher well-being

To measure teachers' well-being, the *Teacher Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire (TSWQ)* by Renshaw (2015) was used. The scale comprises 8 items, divided into 2 subscales (teaching effectiveness; school connection) and assesses teachers' self-reported well-being at work (e.g., "I feel like I belong at this school."; "I feel like my teaching is effective and helpful."). Response options are on a four-point Likert scale, where 1 means *almost never* and 4 means *almost always*. The questionnaire has proven good psychometric properties in previous studies (e.g., Mankin et al., 2017). To assess teachers' general well-being (Renshaw, 2015), we calculated a total score by obtaining the average score of the 8 items. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.91.

Finally, participants reported their teaching experience, indicating the number of years in the profession.

2.3. Overview of Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS 26. Cronbach's alpha values were calculated to determine the internal consistency of the instruments used. The normality of the distribution of variables was assessed by calculating the absolute values of skewness and kurtosis. Absolute values of skewness greater than 2 and absolute values of kurtosis greater than 7 may indicate substantial non-normality (Kim, 2013).

Descriptive statistics (including means and standard deviations) were calculated for the continuous variables: collegial leadership, well-being, and teaching experience. The independent samples t-test was used to compare means between urban and rural teachers. Associations between variables were tested using Pearson's Correlation. For moderation analyses, Hayes' PROCESS macro (version 4.0) was used.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analysis

The Cronbach's alpha values for the variables included in the study were above 0.70. The values for Skewness ranged between -1.18 and 1.65, and the values for Kurtosis ranged between 0.29 and

2.25, indicating a normal distribution (Kim, 2013). These, plus the means and standard deviations, are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Collegial leadership	3.34	.74	1.00	4.00	-1.09	0.29
Teacher well-being	3.52	0.54	1.50	4.00	-1.18	0.61
Teaching experience	8.42	9.45	0	47	1.65	2.25

Note: N = 553

Demographic analyses showed significant environmental differences in perceptions of collegial leadership ($t = 3.09$, $p < .05$) and well-being ($t = 4.14$, $p < .001$). Teachers working in urban schools reported significantly higher scores than those in rural schools on the principal's collegial leadership practices and well-being.

3.2. Associations among Main Variables

The results show statistically significant positive correlations between collegial leadership, teacher well-being, and teaching experience (Table 2).

Table 2. Correlations between collegial leadership, well-being, and teaching experience

Variables	1	2	3
1. Collegial leadership	-		
2. Teacher well-being	.72**	-	
3. Teaching experience	.10*	.25**	-

Note: $p^* < .05$; $p^{**} < .01$

3.3. Moderation analysis

Model 2 in Hayes' PROCESS macro (version 4.0) was used to investigate whether the relationship between collegial leadership and well-being is moderated by teaching experience and school context (rural/urban).

The model proves to be a significant predictor of well-being, $F(7.545) = 108.07$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .58$. The results (Table 3) indicated that: (1) the interaction between collegial leadership and teaching experience was significant, suggesting that the effect of collegial leadership on well-being depends on teaching experience; and (2) the interaction between collegial leadership and school context was significant, suggesting that the effect of collegial leadership on well-being depends on school context (rural/urban). In addition, the combination of the two interactions has a statistically significant effect on the relationship between collegial leadership and well-being, $F(1.545) = 9.42$, $p < .01$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$.

Table 3. Regression analysis findings regarding the moderating effect of teaching experience, school context, and covariates

Variables	B	SE B	p	95% Confidence interval	
				Lower	Upper
Collegial leadership	.55	.03	.00	.494	.614
Teaching experience	.01	.00	.00	.007	.013
Collegial leadership x Teaching experience	-.01	.00	.00	-.012	-.003
School context	.08	.03	.01	.018	.141
Collegial leadership x School context	-.09	.04	.02	-.175	-.015
Gender	.04	.04	.24	-.031	.125
Teaching level	.01	.01	.58	-.023	.042

Gender and teaching level were included as covariates and did not have a significant effect on teachers' well-being ($p > .05$).

In the theoretical hypothesis model, regression coefficients and statistical significance levels were included (Figure 2).

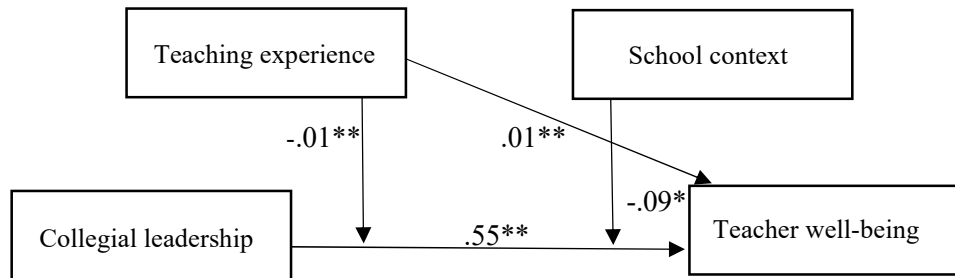


Figure 2. Model regression coefficients diagram

Simple slopes for the association between collegial leadership and teachers' well-being were tested for low (minimum), mean (average), and high (+1 SD) levels of teaching experience and for school context (rural and urban). The results show that collegial leadership was significantly positive correlated with teachers' well-being when teaching experience was low in rural areas ($B = .62, p < .001$) and in urban areas ($B = .52, p < .001$); average in rural areas ($B = .55, p < .001$) and in urban areas ($B = .45, p < .001$); high in rural areas ($B = .47, p < .001$) and in urban areas ($B = .38, p < .001$). Thus, teaching experience attenuates the relationship between collegial leadership and well-being. The positive effect of collegial leadership on well-being is stronger among teachers in rural schools than among those in urban schools. The interactions are illustrated in Figure 3.

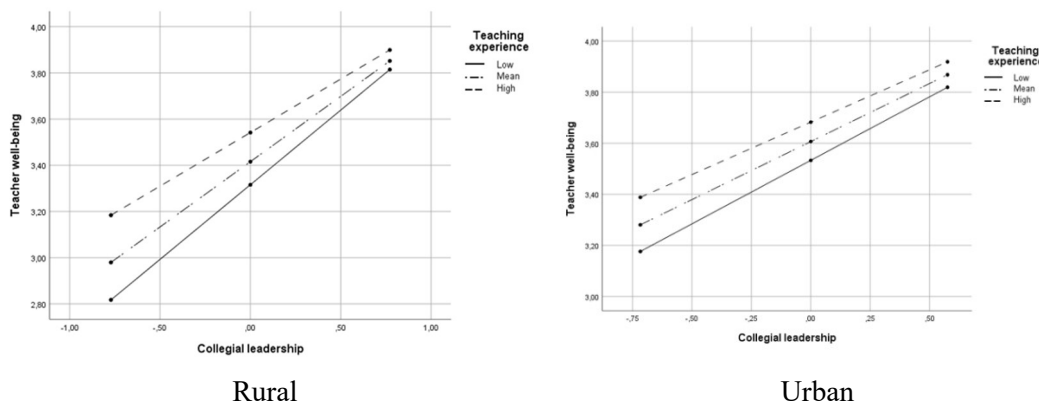


Figure 3. The moderating influences of teaching experience and school context on the relations between collegial leadership and teacher well-being

4. Discussion

This article deepens understanding of teachers' well-being in school in relation to collegial leadership, as well as the potential moderating roles of teaching experience and school context (rural/urban). In line with the first hypothesis, the study indicates a positive association between collegial leadership and teacher well-being. Teachers' well-being increases when principals discuss classroom problems with them, are friendly, treat them as equals, and show appreciation for their work. This result is consistent with Ortan et al. (2021), who mention that teachers' well-being depends on how the leadership organizes the work climate. It is important that teachers are listened to in decision-making, praised and appreciated for their opinions and the results they achieve. These actions lead to increased well-being (Ortan et al., 2021). The role of collegial practices is also

described by Hu et al. (2019), who highlight that under collegial leadership, teachers report much higher self-efficacy and thus experience lower stress.

The second hypothesis illustrates the positive association between teaching experience and teachers' well-being, which has been confirmed. As teachers gain experience, they deepen their teaching knowledge and skills, gain more confidence, and, as a result, their well-being increases. In line with this result, some previous studies highlight teaching experience as a factor that determines self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Li et al., 2019) but also well-being (Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2017).

The third hypothesis highlights teaching experience as a moderator of the relationship between collegial leadership and teachers' well-being. At low, medium, and high levels of teaching experience, collegial leadership significantly influences teachers' well-being. Teaching experience moderates the relationship between the two variables, in the sense that the effect of collegial leadership on well-being decreases as teaching experience increases. A large number of years of teaching experience is associated with higher performance (Aquino et al., 2021), suggesting that teachers' needs vary by career stage. Xie et al. (2022) emphasize that teaching experience moderates the link between perceived leadership and teachers' self-efficacy through collaboration. The effects of leadership are stronger for teachers who have less than 3 years of experience, then attenuate. Teachers at the beginning of their careers need more communication and cooperation than those with more experience (Bellibas & Liu, 2017; Mikser et al., 2021). For them, positive interaction, informational support, resource integration, and emotional support are the foundations on which their adaptation and success in school are consolidated (Li et al., 2019). Collaborations help young teachers improve their practical skills and better manage the classroom (Grangeat & Grey, 2007; de Vries et al., 2013).

According to the fourth hypothesis, school context (rural/urban) moderates the relationship between collegial leadership and teacher well-being, such that collegial leadership has a much greater impact on well-being among teachers in rural areas. In these schools, principal collegiality, distributed power, shared decisions, and a positive climate have a stronger effect on teaching effectiveness and school connection, as elements that build well-being. According to Burns & Machin (2013), rural teachers report smaller peer groups, smaller class sizes, a more positive organizational climate, and higher organizational well-being. Thus, one possible reason why the relationship between collegial leadership and well-being is stronger for beginning teachers in rural schools is the smaller size of the school unit. This context facilitates well-being through closer relationships between leadership and teachers and more frequent interactions.

Limitations and future directions

Although the present research showed that collegial leadership can increase teachers' well-being, it is important to note that this study is cross-sectional and cannot establish causal relationships. Future studies may use longitudinal or experimental designs to clarify this aspect and report the role of leadership on well-being over time. Another limitation is that the data were self-reported by teachers, and most of them came from public schools. Future researchers could collect responses from participants with different roles (e.g., principals, teachers, parents) from both public and private schools.

Teaching experience was highlighted by the number of years of teaching, which does not capture the quality and diversity of professional development. It is recommended that future studies integrate other factors from the school organizational environment (e.g., participation in training courses, relationships with colleagues, perceived support) or personal factors that influence well-being to deepen the field.

5. Conclusions and implications

Despite limitations, this study's results indicate that school principals' collegial practices are associated with teachers' well-being. The effect of collegial leadership is stronger for teachers in the early years of their careers, in rural schools. These findings expand the perspective of research on well-being, highlighting the moderating roles of teaching experience and school context (rural/urban). At the same time, the study brings practical implications for school principals and policymakers. School principals who understand the effects of their behaviors and attitudes on teachers' well-being should practice leadership focused on collegiality, empowerment, collaboration, and support. Principal training programs can also encourage these actions by emphasizing supportive interactions with teachers and awareness of their effects. Especially in rural schools where beginning teachers need more support to feel effective, it is important for principals to adopt these behaviors. It is recommended that training programs be context-specific and adapted to the social, historical, structural, and political conditions that support educational leadership (Brauckmann et al., 2023).

Authors' contribution

All authors contributed equally to this research.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors have not reported any potential conflicts of interest related to this study.

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